

## [Bhavachakra and the Nidanas](#)



# Bhavacakra and the Nidānas

In Buddhism the law of cycles and the law of cause and effect are intimately connected. This is depicted beautifully and profoundly on many [thankas](#) of the Northern Buddhists as the bhavacakra or wheel of life. The symbolic painting takes the form of a wheel held between the claws and teeth of the god of death ([Māra](#)) and signifies the eternal cycle of birth and death. The nave of the wheel contains the properties that keep the wheel turning: A cock: anger or passion, a snake: hatred, and, as cause of both: a swine: ignorance. Often the pig holds both the snake and the cock by their tail. The spokes of the wheel consist of the (mostly six) [gatis](#) or realms of existence in which beings can be born, where they have their existence for shorter or longer periods, and die to be reborn in the same gati or one of the others. Around the spokes we see the twelve [nidānas](#) [from the verb-root dā, to bind; ni, down], which thus form a cycle and each of which is the cause of the next in sequence, and thus all arise in mutual dependence ([pratityasamutpāda](#)). In general, Buddhists regard the teaching concerning the [nidānas](#) and the [gatis](#) from the human perspective, the knowledge of which will lead to liberation from ignorance or illusion, and thus from the cycle of birth and death. It can also be viewed from a cosmic perspective. Of special interest for our purpose is to investigate whether it can also be applied to *all* forms of life.



## Gatis and Nidanas

Sometimes the [nidānas](#) are enumerated clockwise, beginning with ignorance and ending with death, and at other times they are enumerated counter-clockwise, always pointing to the cause of the present condition.

“Pondering on the origin of life and death, the enlightened one recognized that ignorance was the root of all evil; and these are the links in the development of life, called the twelve [nidānas](#): ‘In the beginning there is existence blind and without knowledge; and in the sea of ignorance there are stirrings formative and organizing. From stirrings, formative and organizing, rises awareness of feelings. Feelings beget organisms that live as individual beings. These organisms develop the six fields, that is,

the five senses and the mind. The six fields come in contact with things. Contact begets sensation. Sensation creates the thirst of individualized being. The thirst of being creates a cleaving to things. The cleaving produces the growth and continuation of selfhood. Selfhood continues in renewed birth. The renewed births of selfhood are the causes of sufferings, old age, sickness, and death. They produce lamentation, anxiety, and despair. ... This is the Dharma. This is the Truth.”

The twelve nidānas<sup>[1]</sup> enumerated in sequence (in Sanskrit) are:

1 Avidyā 7 Vedanā

2 Saṃskāra 8 Trṣṇā

3 Vijñāna 9 Upādāna

4 Nāmarūpa 10 Bhava

5 Ṣaḍāyatana 11 Jāti

6 Sparśa 12 Jarāmāraṇa,

each being the cause of the next. Avidyā (ignorance) being the cause of all, as long as avidyā persists, the cycle of illusory existence continues; and the antidote to avidyā is of course knowledge, spiritual knowledge.

## 1 Avidyā

If seen from a human point of view, avidyā is the cause of all suffering, and the cessation of avidyā leads to liberation. It is the lack of true perception (*Theosophical Glossary* p. 229). ((The remarks of H.P. Blavatsky on the nidānas throughout her works are all brought together in H.J. Spierenburg: *The Buddhism of H.P. Blavatsky*, Point Loma Publications, San Diego CA, 1991.)) Lamotte<sup>[2]</sup>, referring to the Saṃyutta Nikāya, says that “Ignorance consists of ignorance of the four noble truths,” which truths are the existence, cause, cessation and means of cessation of suffering, and this definition is also found in the *Dhamma-saṅgaṇi*. More elaborated, the four noble truths, or (catvāri) [ārya-satyāni](#), are: (1) Duḥka or [the truth that] misery and pain are unavoidable concomitants of sentient (esoterically: physical) existence; (2) Samudaya, the truism that suffering is intensified by human passions; (3) Nirodha, that the crushing out and extinction of all such feelings is possible for a man ‘on the path’; (4) Mārga, the narrow way, or that path which leads to such a blessed result (TG 33).

The Saṃyutta Nikāya states further that ignorance consists of ignorance of the origin and disappearance of the skandhas (‘bundles’ or aggregates of attributes of the personality. These skandhas are, in the words of H.P. Blavatsky: rūpa, form or body, which leaves behind it its magnetic atoms and occult affinities; vedanā, sensations, which do likewise; samjñā, or abstract ideas, which are the creative powers at work from one incarnation to another; saṃskāra, tendencies of mind; and vijñāna, mental powers (KT 364)).

Ignorance also consists of ignorance of the fourfold error, viparyāsa, which consists of taking for eternal what is transitory, for pleasant what is unpleasant, for pure what is impure, for a Self what has no self.

From the above it is clear that only humans can combat avidyā, and thus work out their own liberation. Of course knowledge – essential or esoteric knowledge – is the one antidote to ignorance. It is taught that the physical human state of existence is the only, and therefore a very precious, state from which the path toward ‘liberation’ or unification with the highest consciousness can be trodden, if one is prepared to abandon every thought, speech or action which counteracts the clearness of one’s mind with regard to genuine insight. In this sense, animals, plants, mineral life-forms or forms of existence which make no use of a physical vehicle would be excluded from the possibility of self-liberation, unless their jīvas incarnate in the human form. It is however impossible that lower life-forms, as compared with humans, such as plants or animals, with their particular sets of [skandhas](#), would suddenly be reborn with the skandhas that belong to a higher life-form. Why and from where would they attract them? It would be contradictory to the law of [karma](#), which states that one reaps what one has sown. So no plants or animals could suddenly be born human. Only through gradual unfoldment of inherent qualities and properties, through the incessant contact with the environment – which consists, esoterically, entirely of other living beings, can the inherent qualities, ‘experience,’ be awakened. Thus, from an esoteric point of view, evolution takes place gradually, bringing to the surface step by step what belongs to each particular stage of evolution, expressing itself in and into a vehicle fit for that purpose. As a consequence, every jīva will at some point arrive at the human stage, enter the human cycle of birth and death, and create and collect the appropriate skandhas around itself, and then be able to destroy ignorance. Even then, only the ignorance causing *this* cycle is destroyed, and the human stage has been passed successfully. But, esoterically, the law of cycles is so universal, that beyond the human stage and after the human [nirvāna](#), there is another cycle of manifestation on a loftier level, necessarily beginning with ‘ignorance’ on its own level.

The law of cause and effect being universal, and the law of cycles being universal, involving *all* possible individual expressions of life, the chain of nidānas must be true not only for humans, but cosmically, and for all realms of existence. Is ignorance, then, the cause of *all* cosmic manifestation? As manifestation always takes place from the spiritual down into the material for the very purpose of gaining experience and then upwards again, the cycle always results in less ignorance than when it began. Evolution through the plant kingdom leads to the final gain of everything that can be ‘learned’ as a plant, and is a preparation for a next higher evolutionary cycle. Ignorance, then, is not stupidity, but is relative ignorance as compared to what is yet to be evolved.

Viewed from a standpoint of cosmic evolution, avidyā is the first property of cosmic mind in which separation appears. Separation, being the essential illusion or ‘great heresy’ of Buddhism as well as esoteric philosophy, is the parent of all illusions. Beyond separation is Oneness, or the one reality. Once separation has occurred in the (cosmic) mind, the manifestation of forms or properties or individual elemental entities has begun, which bundle or aggregate into skandhas. These bundles of properties or skandhas are what we *are* in our mental, psychological, physical and – as far as the highest skandhas esoterically are concerned – spiritual composition.

The cycle of nidānas describes the chain of cause and effect during the cycles of manifestation. But what about cause during non-manifestation, called, in the cosmic sense, pralaya? There must be a Cause that will in due time bring about the chain of cause and effect, and about which nothing can be known because it is beyond the powers of understanding of any manifested being. This Eternal Cause has been referred to as Ādi-nidāna [ādi means first, original, supreme]. In Blavatsky's translations of the [Stanzas of Dzyan](#) we find Stanza I,7: THE CAUSES OF EXISTENCE HAD BEEN DONE AWAY WITH (a); THE VISIBLE THAT WAS, AND THE INVISIBLE THAT IS, RESTED IN ETERNAL NON-BEING, THE ONE BEING (b)

And her commentary thereon:

(a) 'the Causes of Existence' mean not only the physical causes known to science, but the metaphysical causes, the chief of which is the desire to exist, an outcome of Nidāna and [Māyā](#). The desire for a sentient life shows itself in everything, from an atom to a sun, and is a reflection of the Divine Thought propelled into objective existence, into a law that the universe should exist. According to esoteric teaching, the real cause of the supposed desire, and of all existence, remains for ever hidden, and its first emanations are the most complete abstractions mind can conceive . . . It is impossible to conceive anything without a cause; the attempt to do so makes the mind blank" (SD 1:44). And:

(Stanza IV): . . . THE ETERNAL NIDĀNA . . . WHICH IS . . . : "DARKNESS" THE BOUNDLESS, OR THE NO-NUMBER, ADI-NIDĀNA [SVĀBHĀVAT](#) . . . (SD 1:30-1).

And in her commentary thereon:

“. . . during [Pralaya](#), all in the objective Universe has returned to its one primal and eternal cause, to reappear at the following Dawn – as it does periodically. '[Kāraṇa](#)' – eternal cause – was alone. To put it more plainly: [kāraṇa](#) is alone during the 'Nights of [Brahmā](#).' The previous objective Universe has dissolved into its one primal and eternal cause, and is, so to say, held in solution in space, to differentiate again and crystallize out anew at the following [Manvantaric](#) dawn . . ." (SD 1:41).

The above statements in theosophical literature are not contradictory of the [Advaitic](#) view that cause and effect as a duality can not exist and that all things are essentially unborn and therefore inseparable from the Eternal ([Brahman](#)), or of the Buddhist standpoint that there is in reality no separateness (between manifestation and non-manifestation). Though during the rest periods between cosmic manifestations the "causes of existence have been done away with," the "real" or "absolute" or "causeless cause" which makes the "Wheel of Time and Space" run in eternity, remains hidden and is eternal, and is reflected from level to level, until it reaches the plane where our finite mind can conceive it. Therefore cause and effect as an apparent chain is eternal, of which manifestation is a non-separate aspect, and every expression of manifestation, being part of this eternal and universal continuation, is essentially unborn and undying. Therefore, it seems, what we call effect is the manifestation of an eternal cause, and what we call causes within the realm of manifestation are a translation or manifestation of an eternal cause on that particular level of manifestation. Effect, then, is unfoldment, [evolution](#), manifestation of cause within a particular field of consciousness.

Mental awareness, for example, manifesting itself in ‘new-born’ thoughts and ideas, is thus a coming into the consciousness of the thinker – functioning on the level of mind – of truth from a more universal source, or what in theosophy is called the [buddhic](#) level. The purer, the more stainless and the more subtle the mind of the thinker has become, the better he can perceive the deeper sources of truth, and it is the nobility and specific quality of his attunement which make him contact and adhere to this or that thought. That is where karmic responsibility comes into play: the choices made are the bonds with which one ties oneself and one is thus faced with the complete unfoldment of that to which one has adhered.

[Karma](#), as I understand it, is therefore not a matter of ‘making’ new causes, but a matter of attunement and adherence, which, of course, can only be done by consciousness – though often immersed in ignorance – and experienced by consciousness. Without consciousness no karma.

But here our discussion is concerned with the chain of [nidānas](#) beginning with avidyā and followed by the others:

Avidyāpratyāyaḥ saṃskāraḥ, conditioned by ignorance are the karmic formations, or saṃskāra:

## 2 Saṃskāra

The [saṃskāras](#) are “tendencies both physical and mental” (*Mahatma Letters to A.P. Sinnett* p. 111) or “action[s] on the plane of illusion.” (H.P. Blavatsky: *Theosophical Glossary* p. 229). Literally, the term means: that which puts together (“creates” Dayal[3] 70). It is that which puts together the other [skandhas](#) or aggregates of properties. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* of the Pāli canon says: “And why, o monks, do you say ‘saṅkhāras’? Because they compose a compound. They compose the [rūpa](#) (body) into the body compound, vedanā (feelings) into the feeling compound, saññā (Skt. [saññā](#)) (perception) into the perception compound, and Viññāṇa (Skt. [Vijñāna](#)) (consciousness [rather ‘higher mind’]) into the consciousness compound.” (Saṃ iii 87, ll. 8 ff). The Dhammasaṅgaṇi defines [saṃskāra](#) as: [All] causally induced states, exclusive of the khandhas [Skt. [skandhas](#)] of feeling, perception, and consciousness. The Tibetan equivalent of saṃskāra is ḥdu-byed, “that which is or seems to be compounded, as opposed to simple and elementary, anything pertaining to either body, speech or mind that can be analysed. It is thus particularized: mental associations, thoughts, ideas, etc.; material and physical compounds; phases, epigrams, sententious expressions, etc.” (*Tib. Dict.* 682).

“The saṃskāra-skandha is the fashioner, the ‘together-maker,’ the architect of the other four skandhas, not excepting even [vijñāna](#)” (Dayal 71-2). The skandhas are all ‘empty’ (śūnya) of inherent existence, and are impermanent.

In this connection it is also interesting that one of the meanings of skandha, apart from ‘bundle’ or ‘aggregate’ or ‘pile,’ is “the branching part of a stem, thus suggesting the meaning of the specific ramifications or divisions stemming from the same generic totality, ...” (Verdu: *Early Buddhist Philosophy* (EBP)). [4] This suggests that, though separate, all manifested things are rooted in oneness.

Viewed from the human perspective, the saṃskāras are the first mental awakenings or illusions based on ignorance, which give rise to the coming together of all properties or ‘life-atoms’ which finally lead to birth, followed by death (because everything that composes us is impermanent), which, if ignorance has not been definitely destroyed during life, will again (after some time) be followed by the awakening of illusions and all that follows. And so on. In beings other than humans, the saṃskāra(s) are also the first promptings which lead to the collection of the life-atoms, which will finally lead to birth, death, and so on.

From a cosmic point of view, once separation has taken place in the workings of the cosmic mind, which is carried by the host of first awakened intelligent cosmic beings (‘creative divinities’), all successive forms of manifestation are composed through combination of properties. Of course, this combination can only take place along karmic lines brought over from former cycles of manifestation. Saṃskāra is then the mental activity or tendency (on the plane of illusion) of bringing separate things together.

The word saṃskāra may also signify ‘karmic formations,’ thus referring to reawakening karmic seeds from the past. At the same time these seeds, when germinating, bring about the sequential collecting together of the (other) skandhas which lie waiting to be reinvolved in the newly awakening cosmos or the individual preparing for incarnation (jāti).

Saṃskārapratyayaṃ Vijñānam, conditioned by the saṃskāras is consciousness.

### 3 Vijñāna

Vijñāna is often translated as ‘consciousness’, but this is to my opinion not the best translation, because consciousness is *always* present, relatively ‘dull’ during manifestation, more and more so during further descent into matter, but awake in its most absolute sense only during [nirvāna](#). The first nidāna, [avidyā](#) (absence of knowledge) encompasses the promise of the gaining of knowledge, something which is not possible without consciousness.

Therefore it is more correct to embrace Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa, where vijñāna is identified with manas (mind). Vi-jñāna literally means ‘knowledge-discerning’ or discerning, mind, in the sense of discerning the truth or falseness of the objects of the mind. It is, then, what theosophists call it the ‘higher mind.’ It is said that vijñāna is not susceptible to error (BCW XIV 439).

Vijñāna arises before the other skandhas or aggregates of mentalities, names, (subtle) forms, senses and feelings become involved. It remains active, cosmically during the whole cycle of cosmic evolution until (after) its ‘death,’ and individually during the whole period preparatory to embodiment and the subsequent incarnation.

From a human point of view, vijñāna as discerning mind is latent as a factor of self-consciousness in beings lower than human. It is only in humans that vijñāna as a *self-conscious* part of his being begins to awaken.

Embryologically, vijñāna appears to represent a phase in the incarnation process before the beginning of the collecting of the subtle elements which will model the embryo. The

‘descent’ has begun, but the vehicles of matter, feelings and mind still have to be formed.’

From the viewpoint of cosmic evolution it is the totality of cosmic or divine intelligence. It comes before the actual collecting of the elements which compose things that have form and can be named.

It might seem paradoxical that vijñāna, discerning intelligent consciousness, arises so early in the cycle of cause and effect, soon after ignorance, before any learning process can have taken place. Why would one who discerns go through the trouble of involving himself in the illusions of forms, sensations, cravings and all the suffering that follows? This can be explained if the discerning mind *knows* that a pilgrimage through the cycle of existence is a *necessity* in order to gain knowledge, to destroy relative absence of knowledge. This then is true for a cosmic cycle as well as for the individual cycle of any living being: the wheel must be run to gain a new realm of experience and knowledge.

Vijñānapratyayaṁ nāmarūpaṁ, conditioned by consciousness is mentality and material form.

#### 4 Nāmarūpa

[Nāmarūpa](#) can be translated as ‘personality,’ because ‘person’ (from Latin: per sona) literally means mask – that through which sound is uttered. The personality is therefore not the essence of a being, but that which is his temporary vehicle, built of the aggregates of mentalities, feelings and form. It encompasses therefore that which theosophists call the lower mind involved in desires and gratifications and mental theories about the truth without directly perceiving the truth. Therein it distinguishes itself from the higher mind, which came first in the original evolutionary unfolding. Travelers along the path and reaching the other shore means crossing over from the lower to the higher mind. Nāmarūpa is the human consciousness involved in the lower world of name and form, feelings, sensation, cravings and attachment which, developing understanding by accumulating the essence of experiences, must cross the stream. And, what applies to humans, no doubt applies to any other living being, though of course they do not develop understanding in the human sense of the word.

Nāmarūpa is often translated as ‘mentality and corporeality’ In the process toward embodiment it is not yet corporeality in the sense of a physical body, but “the factors intervening in the forthcoming formation of mental and sensorial organs ... Hence the ‘four primordial elements’ [of earth, water, air and fire] begin the constitution of rūpa-prasāda-atoms (*subtle* matter) and tangible viṣaya-atoms of solidity (gross matter) etc., which collect around the dharmas [‘things’, ultimate ‘factors’ or constituents of existence] of vijñāna and avijñapti-rūpa [‘non-manifest’ material element]” (EBP 98 + glossary/index). Hence this is the stage in which the elements are arranged to compose the as yet intangible form of the entity to be (whether individual or cosmos). Cosmically this means the primordial forms of the entities to be; individually it means the early stages of formation of the embryo – ‘astrally’ and then physically.

Nāmarūpapratyayaṁ ṣaḍāyatanam, conditioned by mentality-corporeality are the six sense-organs.

#### 5 Ṣaḍāyatanam



The six sense organs are eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. This is the exoteric enumeration. Esoterically it is said that there are seven, the first five and two more as yet unknown to mankind. The inner being needs instruments to be in touch with the outer world. For that purpose it develops, from within without, the ‘windows’ to the outer world to perceive it. But on the path to knowledge the senses must be recognized as illusionary: “Mistrust thy senses, they are false. But within thy body – the shrine of thy sensations – seek in the Impersonal for the ‘eternal man’” (VS 26).

The sense organs, first subtle and then physical, develop *before* contact with the outer world is established, contrary to the Darwinist idea that the senses develop as an adaptive *result* which makes the organism fit to function.

In many organisms lower than the human, not all the senses develop, sometimes only one (the ekendriya [jīva](#), such as in trees, referred to as a popular belief among Buddhist lay people in the Suttavibhaṅga (Schmithausen[5] 1991 14) and extensively elaborated in Jainism, there including all mineral jīvas and plant jīvas as well as the jīvas of some classes of lower invisible beings, such as the elemental beings)).

Cosmically, each of the five (esoterically seven) elements is represented by a sense organ: sight by fire, touch by air, smell by earth, etc (see Section III).

Ṣaḍāyatanam pratyayaḥ sparśaḥ, conditioned by the six bases or organs of cognition is contact.

## 6 Sparśa

Sparśa, contact or touch, is the making of contact of the six sense organs (including mind) with their objects: the eye with that which can be seen, or light, the mind with the object of thought, etc. It constitutes the encounter of the conglomerates of gross atoms (paramāṇu-saṃghāta) with the subtle, inner prasāda-element of the five organs. Hence the five sense organs are also termed sparśāyatanāni (bases of ‘contact’) (EBP 38).

We have now reached the stage for any being in the cosmos where contact is established with the world in which experience is to be gained and where awareness of the environment penetrates into the individual consciousness. Thus mutual interaction between conscious beings of equal and different levels of development is established.

Sparśapratyayā vedanā, conditioned by contact are feelings or sensations.

## 7 Vedanā

Vedanā is translated as feeling(s) or sensation(s). Once contact is made by the senses or the mind with an object, conscious perception arises. Vijñāna (inner, higher mental consciousness) caused the mentalities and subtle forms to be attracted, then the senses were developed through which contact with the outer world – which is experienced as separate – became possible, and once this contact is established, the personal consciousness experiences this outer world as either attractive [causing joy], repellent [causing suffering] or neutral (sukha, duḥka or asukhāduḥka). Vedanā is also a [skandha](#), i.e. an aggregate of feelings or sensations, and as skandhas are picked up from the past, karmically, feelings and sensations are *aroused* rather than *caused* by the sensual or mental contact.

Vedanāpratyayā tṛṣṇā, conditioned by feeling awareness, thirst for physical life or incarnation is aroused.

## 8 Tṛṣṇā

Tṛṣṇā (in Pāli: taṇhā) means thirst, thirst for life. It is the clinging, the craving for experience in the phenomenal world, which is transitory and illusory, and is the force that leads to birth and to fear of death, because at death the objects one wishes to keep a hold on are lost. “Kill love of life . . . to replace the fleeting by the everlasting.” (H.P. Blavatsky: *The Voice of the Silence* 13-14). It is stated that after [avidyā](#), [tṛṣṇā](#) is the root-cause of all evil (Dayal 241). In the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra* it is declared that avidyā is the father and tṛṣṇā the mother of the phenomenal world (Dayal 241). If there were no ignorance concerning the non-real and suffering-arousing nature of the world of phenomena, there would be no longing for life. Tṛṣṇā is the force which keeps the cycle going, because it is the recognition of karmic seeds or energies that are left over from former lives (cf. OG 175-6). Once reborn, new karmic causes are sown with which one connects oneself for the future. Love of sensational experience should be replaced by love of eternal wisdom. This choice, of course, can only be made by humans. But tṛṣṇā is also the driving force for the cosmos as a whole, or for beings other than human. If nature were not cyclic by necessity, the pull would be ever downwards. But, as the cycle pursues its course and experience on the lowest, most material level becomes exhausted, tṛṣṇā will naturally develop into *spiritual* thirst, longing for experience in the higher realms of the individuals’ nature. Reaping the essence of the experiences, the individual replaces avidyā by vidyā or the culmination of what that individual – animal, plant, self-conscious human or any other being – can become in its cycle.

Tṛṣṇāpratyayam upādānam, conditioned by thirst is grasping.

## 9 Upādāna

[Upādāna](#), literally “that material substratum by means of which an active process is kept alive or going” hence “fuel” (for a fire) (Dayal 241). If tṛṣṇā is the longing for, upādāna is the actual grasping, and therefore the creative cause (cf. TG 229) of that which will lead to birth in one of the realms of existence (in one of the [gatis](#) in one of the [dhātus](#)).

Upādānapratyaya bhavaḥ, conditioned by grasping is re-existence.

## 10 Bhava

Bhava means ‘existence or ‘becoming’ in the sense of karmic existence or becoming. According to Lamotte (p. 38), bhava should here be taken to mean punarbhavajanakaṁ karma, karma that gives rise to rebirth. It is “the karmic agent which leads every sentient being to be born in this or another mode of existence in the [trailokya](#) [or triloka, three worlds, see below] and gati” (TG 229). “. . . a moral agent which determines where you will be born, i.e., in which of the [triloka](#). Of course, the realm and circumstances of birth are karmic, resulting from the seeds sown in a previous existence to which one is attracted. The circumstances under which one will live are thus not determined at the moment of incarnation, but by the energies which were set in motion in previous births.

The [triloka](#) in Buddhism encompasses [kāmadhātu](#), [rūpadhātu](#) and [arūpadhātu](#), the planes of desire, form and beyond form (as conceived by humans). In [purānic](#) and theosophical literature the same concept is covered by the [saptaloka](#), the seven [lokas/talas](#). The higher lokas are inhabited by beings far beyond the human stages of existence, and also by those humans who have earned the right to [nirvāna](#) by destroying [avidyā](#) [ignorance] but choose to remain within the karmic cycle to help those still struggling upwards. But they too are subject to the universal laws of karma and cyclic existence. The fact that the nidānic cycle is also valid for [arūpadhātu](#) or the highest lokas where the knowledge of the inhabitants is far beyond any human knowledge, proves the universality of the nidāna system.

Bhavapratyayā jātiḥ, conditioned by the karma which gives rise to re-existence is birth.

## 11 Jāti

All the former [nidānas](#) were subsequent preparatory stages from the beginning of the present cycle up to actual birth in one of states of existence or [gatis](#). The story is true for every individual rebirth, but also for the cosmic cycle which includes very many individual rebirths for all living beings involved, from the lowest to the highest. Every individual cycle for whatever living being will lead to some accumulation of knowledge, but only if the great cycle composed of many cycles has been run, [avidyā](#) will be replaced by [vidyā](#). The timespan between birth and death is that of suffering, because of the involvement in and attachment to all that is perishable – physically, psychologically and with regard to limited and therefore māyāvic ideas. Of course the [māyā](#) of higher beings is of a loftier nature than the māyā of humans or lower beings.

When jāti has taken place, the cumulation of all the nidānas seems complete. It is only now that humans can make the self-conscious effort to escape the cycle of continuous rebirths by destroying absence of knowledge by gaining inner essential knowledge, thus destroying the thirst for life.

The ways in which birth can take place and the realms of existence for which the system of [nidānas](#) is valid, proves that it applies not only to humans. Birth can take place in a regular way (through a womb, or egg etc.), but also anupapādaka [[aupapaduka](#)] ('parentless') (H.J. Spierenburg: *Inner Group Teachings* 81). The last mode of birth applies to beings such as [nirmanakāyas](#) (see below), which have no physical body. If we study what is meant by the [gatis](#) and the [dhātus](#), more becomes clear about the universal range of the [nidāna](#) teaching. The three [dhātus](#) of Buddhism are equivalent to the seven [lokas/talas](#) of the Purāṇas and Theosophy, and are as such extensively discussed in Section III. The [gatis](#) (though found with some differences in different places) are usually five or six exoterically, and, according to Blavatsky, seven esoterically. Blavatsky gives both the exoteric and the esoteric enumeration:

Exoteric:

1 devas ('gods')

2 men

3 asuras ('demon') [sometimes: demigods], the gati which was added later

4 men in hell, nāraka or rather in one of the purgatories.

5 pretas, hungry ghosts, with very small mouths and very big bellies, signifying ‘insatiability,’ devouring demons on earth” (IGT 81)

6 animals

Some of these modes of existence are pleasant, some unpleasant, some of shorter, some of very long duration (gods and demigods), but even the gods envy humans, because the human state is the only state from which liberation of the saṁsāric cycle can be accomplished. The popular belief is that one can for karmic reasons be born in any of these gatis, so a man can be born as an animal next time. Therefore human existence is very precious, and this idea is often used to encourage people to practice the Buddhist dharma, because the opportunity is very rare. But this is not logical, because the next birth is determined by the skandhas left behind last time, to which one is again attracted.

Esoteric: (IGT 81):

1 higher gods [[dhyāni chohans](#)]

2 [devas](#) or [pitrs](#)

3 [nirmānakāyas](#)

4 [bodhisattvas](#)

5 men in [Myalba](#) (our earth)

6 [kāma-rūpic](#) existences, whether of man or animals, in kāma-loka

7 [elementals](#) (subjective existences).

1 Dhyān chohans or Dhyāni chohans, lit. ‘lords of meditation’ are spiritual beings who were men in former world periods [[manvantaras](#)] (*Occult Glossary* 39). [Dhyān chohan](#) is a general term for those divinities of many different classes, each with its own department of Nature to supervise [kāmadhātu](#), the lowest of the three [dhātus](#) and to inspire (J. Tyberg *Sanskrit Keys to the Wisdom Tradition* p. 28-9), in subsequent hierarchical levels of existence which have been humans in the past in a relatively ‘recent’ (in terms of billions of years) or more remote period of cyclic existence. They are the ‘Architects’ of the spiritual arc of evolution (Tyberg SK 29).

2 Devas are ‘shining beings,’ a general term. Pitrs are the ‘Fathers’ of mankind, or the progenitors of the various parts, higher as well as lower, of which the human constitution is composed (see Ch III). The higher have been humans in former manvantaras.

3 Nirmānakāya means ‘forming’ or ‘creating’ body. It is the lowest of the [trikāya](#), ‘the three glorious vestures.’ It is the body ‘chosen by a [bodhisattva](#) who becomes a Buddha of Compassion . . . [and] gives up the unspeakable bliss of [nirvāna](#) in order to live a ‘Secret Life’ of service to humanity.” (Tyberg SK 50) This vesture alone makes it possible to be aware of worldly matters and thus stretch out a helping hand. In theosophical literature the term is also used for those who choose this vesture. A

nirmāṇakāya is a complete man possessing all the principles of his constitution except the [liṅga-śarīra](#) [the model body of subtler matter], and its accompanying physical body. He is one who lives on the plane of being next superior to the physical plane, and his purpose in so doing is to save humans from themselves by being with them, and by continuously instilling thoughts of self-sacrifice, of self-forgetfulness, of spiritual and moral beauty, of mutual help, of compassion, and of pity.

4 Bodhisattva, ‘he whose essence is wisdom or intelligence.’ A human who has almost become a [Buddha](#), whose consciousness has become at one with his own inner divinity. While the higher principles of such a human can learn no more [in this cycle avidyā has been destroyed], the spiritually awakened personal man, the bodhisattva, may choose, out of compassion, to remain on earth, that means to run the cycle again and again to help others, occasionally through physical incarnation, or by assuming the vehicle of nirmāṇakāya (cf. OG 19).

5 Humans in [Myalba](#), our earth, which is like a hell compared to higher states of being. Exoterically, myalba is regarded as an actual hell, a place, a state of being of great suffering.

6 [Kāma-rūpic](#) existences are the temporary astral forms of the desirous parts of humans or animals after death. The human consciousness undergoes a second death, to be reborn in subjective higher mental consciousness until the processes of descent toward reincarnation begin with the collection of the waiting [skandha](#) from former existences.

7 Elementals are, within our cyclic universe, the lowest classes of beings, in the sense of evolutionary development (though not necessarily in the sense of spirituality). Usually the invisible realms of nature spirits which in evolutionary development are even below or before the mineral kingdom are meant, but it is also legitimate in theosophical language to include minerals, plants and animals within the concept of ‘elementals.’ According to De Purucker’s *Occult Glossary*, “minerals themselves are expressions of one family or host or hierarchy of elemental beings of a more evolved type. The vegetable kingdom likewise manifests merely one family or host of elemental beings which are now in the vegetable-phase of their evolution on this earth. Just so likewise is it as regards the beasts. The beasts are highly evolved elemental beings, relatively speaking” (OG 43).

Jātipratyayaṃ jarāmarāṇam, conditioned by birth is old age and death.

## 12 Jarāmāraṇa

Birth leads to the miseries of physical existence, such as illness and old age, finally ending in death, and, unless ignorance has been completely replaced by knowledge during life – which is extremely rare -, is followed by a new cycle. To speak of ‘miseries’ is speaking in human terms. But the law is universal. “. . . every atom, at every moment, as soon as it is born, begins dying” (OG 81).

But the period between life and death is also the period of opportunity. Here it is possible to sow seeds for the future, and human beings do so by self-conscious choice, for good or worse. To what one has sown one will be attracted in the next cycle, and thereby is determined what will be the quality of the next birth. If these seeds are of a lofty moral and intuitive-intellectual nature, one will start the next birth with the fruits

of that and have good opportunities to slay ignorance further. Until finally all ignorance, all illusion, is destroyed and one has learned all that can be learned – for the time being. For humans, learning is predominantly in the field of the mind, for other beings learning encompasses other aspects of the cosmic constitution. For the cosmos itself, learning is in the field of the totality of its constitution expressed in all its forms of manifestation. And no doubt, the cosmos is itself part of a greater cosmos.

About the experiences of the consciousness between death and the first impulses that will lead to the next rebirth much detailed information is gained from the [Bardo Thödol](#), the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which describes the experiences after death in 49 ‘days’ or phases. The experiences after physical death are confrontations with aspects of one’s own being, and the recognition of these aspects. The more one has learned about the deeper aspects of one’s inner being, the more one is able to distinguish the real from the illusory. If no more illusions can distract the inner mind, automatic rebirth is avoided, but conscious rebirth can be chosen for the well-being of others. The period between birth and death is the opportunity to gain the essential, true, inner, esoteric heart-knowledge which will safeguard the pilgrim from the pursuit of illusions when the consciousness is faced with its own productions.

Still, there is believed to be much more to the meaning of the nidānas than can possibly be discussed here, which is apparent from the following quotation from H.P. Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine*: “Alone the Initiate, rich with the lore acquired by numberless generations of his predecessors, directs the ‘Eye of [Dangma](#) [eye of the purified soul]’ toward the essence of things in which no [Māyā](#) can have any influence. It is here that the teachings of esoteric philosophy in relation to the [Nidānas](#) and the Four Truths become of the greatest importance; but they are secret” (SD 1:45).

1. The twelve nidānas are depicted as 1. (avidyā, ignorance) a blind man; 2. (saṃskāras), a potter signifying the first differentiation of primordial matter; 3. (vijñāna, higher mental awareness), a monkey; 4. (nāmarūpa, name-form), crossing the stream; 5. (ṣaḍāyatana, the five senses and the mind as perceptor), a house with six windows; 6. (sparśa, touch), two lovers discovering each other); 7. (vedanā, becoming aware of the outer world), a man with an arrow piercing his eye; 8. (tṛṣṇā thirst for life), a man drinking wine, served by a woman; 9. (upadāna, grasping of old karma), a man collecting fruits; 10. (bhava, becoming), coitus, or a pregnant woman; 11. (jāti, birth), a birth; 12. (jarāmāraṇa, decrepitude and death), a corpse being carried away. [[<<](#)]
2. Lamotte, Étienne: *History of Indian Buddhism*, Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-La-Nouvelle, 1988. [[<<](#)]
3. Dayal, Har: *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1932, 1978. [[<<](#)]
4. Verdu, Alphonso: *Early Buddhist Philosophy in the Light of the Four Noble Truths*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1985. [[<<](#)]
5. Schmithausen, Lambert: *The Problem of the Sentience of Plants in Earliest Buddhism*, Tokyo, The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1991. [[<<](#)]